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ABSTRACT

The overall plea in maintaining communication English as a subject in New Zealand technical schools is for "communication" to be recognized as separate from "English." The emphasis, then, is on the use of language, not its analysis; and this shift seems to make the course more appealing than regular English study for vocational technical students. In each section of the course, the trend is to get students first to estimate what others are trying to convey and how far they have been successful, and then to use assessment as a basis for the students' individual approaches to communication. Although its syllabus is still evolving, the communication course maintains particular emphasis on preparing formal reports. The other types of communication that are treated in the course include: (1) using libraries and other public sources of information, (2) making prepared speeches, (3) interpreting instructions and directions, (4) becoming familiar with statistics and graphs, (5) understanding how visual media such as television and photography communicate ideas, (6) interpreting news from print media, (7) working with the new computer-based communication techniques, (8) using postal express delivery and telegraphic services, (9) dealing with meetings (their procedures and the duties of individual participants), (10) filling in forms and questionnaires, and (11) developing test-taking abilities. (RI)

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A Course in Communication

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES
INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

I teach a subject called Communication English. If the word "communication" didn't trail visions of Post Office repair men perched at the tops of snowswept poles, or earnest-looking Air Force personnel straining at their earphones to catch such life-and-death messages as "Roger and out", the subject could well be labelled simply "Communication", since the English content is quite incidental. The course would be equally valid in Maori, Chinese or Swahili, and indeed it's common knowledge that extremely valid communication can take place without verbal language altogether.

Perhaps I shouldn't be giving this paper at an English conference, then? But English is, in almost all cases, our students' native tongue; we use it to teach communication just as our colleagues use it for teaching the intricacies of a diesel motor, real-estate law or nursing. I myself use it to teach mathematics and physics. Our students use it to communicate back to us. Its use in teaching communication skills is as valid a topic for an English conference as any other across-the-curriculum study; and I'll treat the subject "communication" from just that angle. You may object that communication is a tool subject, not basic like motor engineering or real estate law, and that's true; but so's mathematics a tool subject, or at least it is as we teach it at Christchurch Polytechnic. The syllabus layout in the tool subject "communication" in fact owes a good deal to the layout of our syllabuses in the tool subject "mathematics". The basic questions in each include: In what situations are the students likely in the next (say) ten years to need aspects of this subject? By what steps can we give them the information, or bring them to the ideas, which will enable them to cope with such situations? How may these steps be presented in an orderly series, where each skill is adequately prepared for and also is strongly-enough built to bear the weight of more complex skills?

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Please don't take from all this that we consider English irrelevant to our communication subject. Just as communication is a tool subject for motor engineering and so-on, English, or at any rate what's commonly thought of as formal English, is a tool subject for communication. This English tool subject, however, is one that we don't feel constrained to teach on this particular course; but we give all entrants a pre-test in formal English which they must pass as a requirement of a pass in Communication English. Ideally, they shouldn't be allowed to start the communication course until they've demonstrated a reasonable literacy in English; but as AAVA, the examining authority under which we work, allows all students to attempt the communication subject in their first year, we can insist only that those with an inadequate command of English shall take special tutorial classes concurrently with their main communication classes.

Course Background

I must explain before going any further that I'm referring specifically to only one of the communication courses offered at Christchurch Polytechnic - the course at technician level for New Zealand Certificates and related awards. This is for two reasons: first, this course has been a model for our other communication courses and is still the growing-point in many respects; and second, as I don't currently teach in the other courses I'm not properly equipped to talk about them.

The people who come to our technicians' courses would expect to end up in the middle slot of industry, commerce or administration, between the professional and the tradesperson. Many will quite early be forepeople or supervisors, and a number eventually managers: some are indeed already in positions of responsibility when they take the course, although others are in their first year out of school and some of these are in a full-time year at the Polytechnic studying mainly third-year subjects of the certificate.

Although AAVA (in full, the Authority for Advanced Vocational Awards) exercises final control, the syllabuses of most of the lower-level courses, of which Communication English is deemed to be one, are laid down only as a guide; and the individual teaching institutions make their own assessments of students, sending merely the students' grades to the Authority.

The certificate courses have nominally a five-year structure within which many subjects, especially those of the first two years, may be exempted through passes in specified examinations in New Zealand or elsewhere. Communication English, however, can't be exempted, even by years of everyday experience or university study or both. The Authority from its inception in 1958 has always taken the view that the requirements of people working in business and industry go a good deal

beyond what's taught in schools and are substantially different from those of university arts students exploring the English language as such. Unfortunately, these distinctions were n't as well reflected in the syllabuses put out as a suggested pattern by the Authority as in the Authority's announced philosophy; consequently, it seems that in some institutions the content of the New Zealand Certificate subject (at first entitled English, latterly Communication English) has, in the past at any rate, been little different from that of school English courses, and from time to time there've been attempts to have Communication English made exemptible by school examination passes. The fact that none of these attempts has come from the Christchurch Polytechnic, but that on the contrary ^{Christchurch} submissions have tended to help defeat them, leads us to have confidence in the general acceptability of our course - at least within our own Polytechnic and, through the textbook which arose from it, in many New Zealand tertiary institutions.

When I first came to teach in the Polytechnic 15 years ago, the NZC English course consisted mainly of remedial work in formal English, with a little practice in meeting procedure, a speech once during the year, and a report which often consisted of nothing much more than the student's unsupported opinions on some topic of the day or, if the student had no strong opinions, a summary of ideas lifted from a newspaper. There was little if any progression from one class meeting to the next, topics following one another in an almost ad hoc order. The students were in general bored: the better ones resented having to study what they already knew, while the rest found themselves up against similar barriers to those which had baffled them at school.

A new approach was clearly necessary. When C R Hockley (now Head of Department of Languages and Communication Studies) joined the staff, we began a drastic revision of the syllabus to include many topics likely to be relevant to the students' working situation, both present and future. The syllabus was ordered along the lines of a mathematics or science syllabus, with topics building on each other where possible and in any case a time allocation suggested for each. Remedial formal English continued to occupy a slot, but one which diminished as more and more communication material was added.

Since the time allocation to NZC English remained unchanged (at two hours weekly for one year) there came a stage where formal English was excluded altogether, but as many students showed an obvious need for remedial help optional tutorial classes were offered. As with optional tutorials in other subjects, the attendance was mostly by those who least needed the extra work, so that the tutorials have now been made compulsory at one hour a week for two terms to those who fail the pretest in formal English.

Course Still Evolving

Within the limits imposed by the two-hour allocation, the Communication English syllabus is still evolving. A notable freeing move was achieved a few years ago when the end-of-year examination was abandoned in favour of a requirement that all students attain a pass-mark in all assignments (after as many resubmissions as prove necessary). While the assignments are monitored, teachers have a wide latitude in the choice of them; this not only enables the teacher to explore developing areas of communication such as (at the moment) simulation games, video recording, or word processing but allows a greater proportion of oral work and some study of non-verbal communication.

While we have always acknowledged that a great deal of everyday communication is oral, and that students need help in coping with this just as with written communication, any trend towards an increased oral content was frustrated by the need to prepare students for the written final exam and non-verbal input had to be limited to a mention.

"Aha!" I hear some of the traditionalists say. "This is one of the fellows who subverts all standards in spelling, punctuation and formal sentence construction in the interests of the Vernacular - the language of disc jockey, sports commentator, TV cop or soap-opera star." Not so. Because forms of communication are varied, our teaching topics need to be equally varied. To understand other people and to be understood themselves our students require to be literate in the various written media of research, commerce and industry; they also need to know how to appear in person and on the electronic media. We aim at a course which does the best possible for them in all these media, within the short time available.

This shortage of time does in fact kill, or at least debilitate, a good deal that we should like to do. The opportunities for communication increase, and our awareness of the existing opportunities increases, but our time allocation remains the same. At our polytechnic the tool subject mathematics gets a total of 14 hours a week counting all hours from Maths 1 to Maths 4 (inclusive) - seven times the time available to Communication English. The specialist subjects get similarly large allocations. I'm not saying that these subjects don't need the time - my (current) experience in teaching NZC maths

and physics indicates strongly that they do; but knowledge and skill that can't be effectively communicated are of strictly limited use - limited to a great extent by this very lack of communicability. The loud complaints ^{sometimes} we hear from our colleagues in other departments about senior students who can't adequately use a textbook, interpret instructions, contribute to a discussion or write a report support a case for longer hours for our communication course. It's true that the time allocation for the various subjects lies, in the end, with the local administrators; but as long as AAVA lists Communication English as a subject which may be completed in the first year there's little scope for extension. Much of the material is well outside the experience of people in their first year of work - not to mention those who come straight from school and attend the polytechnic full-time.

To return for a moment to the relative content of written and oral work in our course: I don't wish to give the impression that parts of the course are labelled "written" and other parts "oral". In all topics, even the set speech and the formal report, there's interplay between written and oral. What I am saying is that we don't have to let the written aspects dominate simply for the need to have something down to mark. Continuous assessment in small classes - and our classes of 15 to 20 are small by the standards of many other institutions - allows a student's oral and even non-verbal contribution to be assessed as well as what he writes, and in many aspects of communication the oral input is more important than the written. We ourselves are only now beginning to appreciate the opportunities presented.

Course Structure

I've talked a lot about the course without giving details of what's in it. Unfortunately the shortage of class time has meant that the course structure is really only an exoskeleton - a skeleton like that of an insect, substantial and well-defined but allowing little indication of either the bulk or the health of what lies beneath. The various teachers have furnished the structure with their choice from the materials available; but such are the riches of this subject that (to mix the metaphor somewhat) I think of us not as storemen trucking out this or that item when the demand indicates but rather as Aladdins sorting choosily among the treasures for what may best be included in a very limited carry-away load.

In each section of the course, the trend is to get the student first to estimate what others are trying to convey and how far they've been successful, and then use the assessment as a basis for the student's own approach to communication.

Use of libraries and other public repositories of information such as museums is a basic skill, followed by practice in efficient reading and selective listening (with creative listening as a useful possible extension). The study of the library has of course value in itself, but it also gives ideas useful in the future in building up reference material in the working situation; while the ease or otherwise of understanding an author or speaker is an object lesson for the student's own language and style.

Making a prepared speech to the class not only puts the onus on a student to present something acceptable and interesting to his peers but may be used as an opportunity for the others to assess the value of another's contribution, a valuable skill for the fore^{person} or manager. The assessment may be expressed orally or in writing, giving practice in succinctness in either case; if orally in public, that's good practice in making what may be unwelcome statements while avoiding giving offence.

The interpretation of instructions and directions, including Government statutes and regulations, has an important part in our course, because the effects of misinterpretation can be quite disastrous. The errors made by students in interpreting instructions lead on directly to the composition of instructions. Both specific (active) instructions to subordinates and general (passive) instructions such as those to be placed on dangerous goods or included with new equipment.

Statistics form a part of the course because of the widespread tendency for those with a barrow to push to make their case with the aid of graphs which may or may not convey the true position to the uninitiated. The students learn how to use graphs to present information truthfully and forcefully; if in doing so they also learn how to use graphs dishonestly, we can only hope that (a) they won't in fact use them that way and (b) the teaching of communication principles more widely will eventually undermine any advantages of such

dishonesty.

Other visual media the study of which can form a useful part of the communication course include television and photography (cine and still) -

as a vehicle only, for while the operation of equipment usually has to be included, processing and maintenance are jobs for the specialist, the user needing only to recognise common processing mistakes and equipment faults. Closed-circuit television is excellent for showing people their strengths and faults in speaking (including in meetings); photographic prints help with instructions and are invaluable in many reports; transparencies are extremely useful to illustrate points in speeches or as a part of audiovisual presentations. The students can learn also to appraise material put out by other people - an extremely valuable skill in assessing the worth of visual material offered by colleagues or consultants, or preparing training or reporting sessions for staff. There's also a strong visual content in most advertising and publicity material; a knowledge of what to look for is invaluable in assessing the worth of material prepared by the student's own firm as well as what to allow oneself to be influenced by in the claims of others.

The student should be at home in the less-with-it media too, such as newspapers and magazines (including house journals and staff information bulletins), radio and sound-recording. The course includes the interpretation of news and other items in the public media, and preparing material for these and their in-house counterparts.

Consideration of the media leads to at least a look at the new computer-based communication techniques such as word-processing and videotex, the TV-based instant information system. Our polytechnic is planning for a large number of wordprocessing machines and these should be available regularly to Communication English students.

Familiarity with postal express delivery and telegraphic services is useful to anyone in business or industry, and a small amount of time is devoted to these. The Post Office's telephone-courtesy films are

very helpful in giving pointers to the effective use of the telephone.

An important section of the course deals with meetings - the duties of chairman and secretary, paperwork, meeting procedure, and points on speaking.

Filling in forms and questionnaires seems to occupy a larger and larger part of everyday life. The course includes hints on completing these - what information to give, and what not to. It also gives ideas on constructing them, not least in the hope that the next generation of forms and questionnaires will as a result be a little more succinct and intelligible. A usual exercise for the students is to compose a questionnaire and then submit it to a cross-section of the public.

While business letters are taught in almost all schools, it's found necessary to include a section on these, particularly as memos (in-house letters) and form letters seem new concepts to many students. The letter of application for a job is given prominence, especially in these days of high unemployment, and a letter-writing exercise of this type is often followed up by a practice interview panel.

Interpersonal relations are dealt with only incidentally, apart from a four-hour study of trade union and other industrial matters. I'd like us to have time for stimulation games, role-playing and other sociological activities.

Towards the end of the year examination techniques are looked at. The trend away from formal examinations in schools has meant that some students come to New Zealand Certificate examinations with perhaps a good working knowledge of the subject to be examined but few clues as to how to present their knowledge to the examiner. A complementary skill is the teaching and testing of others.

Formal Report

The most important section of the course is the formal report. It's been said that "every report is an application either for promotion or demotion". All our students have to submit an acceptable formal report based on their own investigations. Some of the best are based on real situations and give direction to plans of their employers or a club they belong to, or to a project of their own. Unfortunately, however, many students in their first year out of school haven't the background to properly construct such a report. Even if the rest of the course is to remain at first-year level (and some of it comfortably can), only simple reports should be required at this stage. Major formal reports should be left until the student has maturity and experience such as is demanded of those entering at least the fourth year of NZ Certificates. Allowing students to attempt reports before they've the background to do them competently

means, inevitably, that many will be passed in spite of an inferior report or else will be prevented by it from passing.

Student Reactions

The course has in general been well-received by the students; moreover, the more experienced the student, and the longer out of school, the more favourable is likely to be the reaction. We see several possible reasons for this gradation of response:

1. There may be an adverse reaction to any course labelled "English" from a student who found little of interest in previous English programmes;
2. Some, at least, of the material and/or presentation of our course is more suitable to students at advanced level than beginners.
3. Our material is based on the norms of the community, not of full-time students.

If students don't see relevance in our course because they aren't sufficiently familiar with the working community or because our course is more suitable to advanced students than beginners, that's only what we'd expect in present circumstances: the course is mainly for the technician in the community, only fractionally for the student in the classroom. Our only regret is that AAVA regulations don't allow us to grade the programme appropriately.

An adverse reaction to the subject "English", however, has wider implications.

While I've no first-hand experience of English classes in the schools, I'd suspect from the attainments and attitudes of students who come to us direct from school that the approach and material must both differ considerably from our own. The differences seem to include that literature features prominently in most fifth, sixth and seventh-form programmes, that ability to type and write and lay out what's been typed or written is given little weight, and that readiness to express ideas tends to be rated much more highly than accuracy of expression.

If this is a fair assessment I can understand the reactions of some of the people we get in our technicians' courses: literature isn't their bent; their expression tends to be blunt and to the point, and they like other people's to be the same. Their needs in communication may well go unmet by a course heavy on literature. A switch back to grammar - as I understand is happening in some schools - doesn't help, because any interest they have in language is in its use, not its analysis. If you think of language as a vehicle, a conveyance, they're

in our course,
interested not at all in the mechanics of the vehicle and only to a limited extent in what goods are conveyed: their main concern is how the goods travel and are delivered - by this or what other vehicles, under what guidance, and by what routes; what's communicated belongs, by and large, to other subject areas. While we in our course try to make sure the vehicle is sound and may ask whether the goods are worth conveying, our main offering is a sort of transport and accommodation guide. We don't think schools provide this. They offer other things in English, no doubt often very competently or better, but the student not particularly interested in those things may become disaffected from the subject as a whole.

For our part, we consider literature not included in our brief while layout is. We don't insist on our students' learning to type, but we encourage typing even one-finger ^{(elsewhere than in our} classes, of course); writing has to be legible, and where appropriate tidy. While we value ideas - after all: no ideas, nothing to communicate - we like the expression of them to be disciplined. Among our beginning students there's a distressing amount of indisciplined writing - verbiage, jargon, gobbledegook, all at inordinate length and in sentences and paragraphs of inordinate length, especially among the more fluent; the less fluent (perhaps a quarter to a half of the students), while avoiding the length still manage the verbiage and the rest; their lack of fluency is tied up in particular with faulty sentence-construction, including punctuation, though poor spelling's quite common and vocabulary is likely to be limited. Our remedial programme aims to improve the sentence construction and spelling and vocabulary, and for most students does so quite successfully; verbiage and the like are dealt with in our main course, requiring constant correction. The fluent students' propensity for writing for hours may be an advantage in completing a required number of lines but is a handicap to communication with the general reader. I can see that the needs of school pupils differ from those of our students in that most pupils need to communicate only with their specialist teachers and then mainly in writing, not with all and sundry by various media as our students must; but whether the school approach is the most advantageous for a particular pupil may well depend on how long the pupil intends to continue full-time study.

In all, our communication course, while presupposing literacy in English, has little affinity to any course in pure language, let alone one in literature. Most of those who teach in it are in fact English teachers, but even this may be a mistake. My own background is a mixed one of mathematics and journalism. Probably we should be looking for communicators from commerce, building, and engineering to bring in fresh ideas - people who would continue to work or teach in those fields while giving some time to Communication English classes. Specialist teachers of English would still take some of the communication classes

but would be more relevantly engaged in establishing and maintaining among the students a high competency in the English language. At present we make do with the minimum of remedial work, bringing the worst up to a standard which is just acceptable rather than trying to improve the overall level. This year fifty-nine of the three hundred entrants to New Zealand Certificate Communication English were directed to remedial tutorial classes, and a further seventeen were strongly recommended to attend. Almost all those in the tutorials were passed in formal English after no more than 25 hours' teaching, a gratifying response, though the pass-standard still leaves much to be desired.

Separate Subject

My overall plea, though - as distinct from the specific one to New Zealand administrators for more time for the certificate Communication English subject - is for communication to be recognised as separate from English, even if necessarily related quite strongly to it in English-speaking countries. English should be a tool subject to communication, as it already is to a wide range of disciplines. Don't fear for your jobs, though, English teachers: the distinction's probably irrelevant in primary school where one teacher takes a range of subjects anyway; in the lower secondary school English teachers would continue to use and teach communication techniques in pursuit of their language teaching. In the upper secondary school and beyond, however, English teaching appears to relate mostly to literature, somewhat to language and only a very little, if at all, to communication. If communication is to get what seems to me a required emphasis at these levels, either the content must be changed or a communication course must be offered separately. Since there must surely remain a need to provide for English language and literature, a separate communication subject looks not only logical but well overdue.